

By Roger Mitton

THERE are fears that warming ties between Vietnam and the US may be hurt by renewed concerns over religious freedom in the communist state.

A delegation from Washington has just ended a two-week tour of Vietnam and is expected to present a critical report to the US Congress.

The members of the Commission on International Religious Freedom met government leaders, including Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and officials from various faiths.

They visited the central highlands, where there has been unrest over curbs on religious activities, especially those involving Protestants.

They also met religious dissidents such as Mr Thich Quang Do, the outspoken deputy leader of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and a nominee for this year's Nobel Peace Prize.

Said a former vice-chairman of the National Assembly's foreign affairs committee in Hanoi, Madam Ton Nu Thi Ninh: 'I don't like this US group coming to check on religious freedom here. Why does America assume the right to monitor us?'

Although the commission's report has not been finalised, The Straits Times has learnt that it is expected to condemn the curbs imposed on religious groups.

It will criticise the difficulties various faiths encounter in registering new premises, forcing them to conduct services in 'house churches' in order to cater to their expanding flocks.

And it will recommend putting Vietnam back on the US State Department's list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) regarding religious freedom.

At a conference in Hanoi last weekend, Mr Chris Seiple, president of the Institute for Global Engagement, said: 'The commission will be more critical, probably with the intent to put Vietnam back on the CPC list.'

When Vietnam was removed from the list last November during President George W. Bush's visit to Hanoi for the Apec summit, many religious groups felt the State Department had acted too hastily.

Their stance was bolstered when Vietnam, after hosting the Apec summit and joining the WTO, cracked down on political and religious dissidents.

Many of them were given lengthy prison terms. The ensuing outcry in the US almost forced the cancellation of President Nguyen Minh Triet's visit to Washington in June.

Reflecting continued American concern, the commission members met some of the jailed activists such as pro-democracy lawyers Nguyen Van Dai and Nguyen Thi Cong Nhan.

In September, the State Department had issued a report stating that 'the respect of religious freedom and practice continued to experience important improvements' in Vietnam.

Said Professor Nguyen Manh Hung of George Mason University near

Washington: 'American officials have admitted that there has been progress in religious freedom and they have successfully opposed moves to put Vietnam back on the CPC list.'

But some US congressmen remained unconvinced, so the commission was sent to evaluate the situation.

Said Professor Shawn McHale, a US academic at the National University in Ho Chi Minh City: 'I expect the commission will continue to be more critical than the State Department.'

Vietnam has initiated a flurry of moves on the religious front to try to lessen the effect of the expected condemnation.

Last month, Prime Minister Dung attended a conference of Catholic bishops and praised the church's contribution to education, health care and national development.

Other groups, including Mennonites and Baptists, were granted permission to operate.

But the biggest move was the decision to seek diplomatic ties with the Vatican, which had been strongly critical of Vietnam.

Mr Dung launched the initiative in January when he met Pope Benedict XVI in Rome.

Signalling its approval of the new opening, the Vatican has indicated that it would be against any move by the US to put Vietnam back on the CPC list.

Said Madam Ninh: 'If Vietnam establishes ties with the world's Catholic community, and there are signs suggesting this will happen, it will help our goal of global integration and make Catholics here feel more secure.'